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I Turcs tal Friul by Pier Paolo Pasolini

Introduction

Pier Paolo Pasolini continues to be known outside of Italy primarily as a film maker and controversial public intellectual whose uncompromising explorations of sexuality, religious meaning and social exclusion gave expression to a “uniquely provocative and prophetic modernity” (Hirschman 9). Recent scholarship in English is only beginning to reveal the extraordinary variety and quality of Pasolini’s writing in Italian, but his early works in Friulian continue to be overlooked.¹ Friulian is a Romance variety spoken in the far northeast of Italy, where Pasolini spent many a summer as a child in his mother’s hometown of Casarsa. In the Friulian of Casarsa Pasolini thought he had found a “pure poetic language” (*Poesie* 8) unsullied by previous literary usage, yet integral to the archaic lifeworld of the marginalized peasants for whom he felt “a sweet and violent love, both turbid and pure” (*Passione* 137).

Friuli had become Pasolini’s main residence since August 1942, when bombing raids drove the family to the safety of the countryside. There, he set up a makeshift school for local children and started an influential literary journal in Friulian, while his younger brother Guido joined the armed Resistance and was killed by pro-Yugoslav partisans.² It is in this context that Pasolini developed the idea for his first and only play in Friulian, *I Turcs tal Friul* or “The Turks in Friuli” which appears here in English for the first time. Based on the events of the Ottoman-Venetian War of 1499, *The Turks in Friuli* is a one-act drama in prose Pasolini probably wrote in May 1944. The inspiration came from a memorial stone visible to this day in the little

Church of Santa Croce, which commemorates the town's deliverance from the Ottoman menace.³

The Turks is an extraordinary text that deserves to be better known not only for its dramatic power and intense representation of human suffering, but also as a document of Pasolini's complex and evolving relationship with Friuli and his language, and his opening to problems of temporality, history, and social change. Pasolini himself was ambivalent about its value: he called it "perhaps the best thing I have written in Friulian" ("To Gianfranco D'Aronco", 29 Nov 1945, *Letters* 213), but never sought to publish or stage it.⁴ The play focuses on the conflicting reactions of the people of Casarsa as they face the Turkish attack, and, through the contrasting figures of Meni and Pauli Colùs, addresses the issue of individual agency vis-à-vis historical change. At a time when Friuli was ravaged by Nazi occupation, civil war, and Allied bombings, these remote events had clear contemporary resonance. The forceful re-enactment of the terror and devastation brought by marauding invaders, and of the split between those who chose to "resist" and those who renounce any choice, simply waiting for events to pass, also makes a statement about the predicament of Friulians (and other Italians) during World War II. The dramatic conflict at the heart of the play is embodied in the Colùs brothers: Pauli, spiritual and kind, attached to ancient traditions and sensible to the beauty of nature; and the turbulent Meni, who defies the authority of Priest and elders and gets killed in an attempt to fend off the Turks. The two characters, who bear the surname of Pasolini's mother, invite identification with Pier Paolo himself and his brother Guido, whose tragic death seems to be obscurely prophesised here. Nevertheless, it is perhaps more accurate to imagine the pair as two sides of Pasolini's own self-image and writerly persona.

Beyond biography, *The Turks* has a strong collective dimension in the many choral scenes and in manifest attempts to reach a popular audience through the simplified dramatic structure (a single act, no divisions of scenes or change of place) and the use of idiomatic expressions such as *governà* (“to see to the cows”). Arguably, the play’s principal aim is to foster an understanding of the Friulians’ true position in history and class consciousness. The evocation of a quasi-mythical past is not meant to renew the ancestral fear of “the Turk” as the barbarous Other, or to uphold an exclusionary notion of place. On the contrary, the advancing Turks, who never appear on the scene, personify the fundamental impulse of creative destruction that sets historical progress in motion. Their battle song, in verses, is an explosion of pure poetic brilliance that shatters the drab litanies of the cowed peasants, giving new form to the erotic-aesthetic longing of Pasolini’s earlier Friulian lyrics. The Turks take pride in their own youthful bodies, “sheathed in gleaming of [their] ancient gold” and uninhibitedly assert their zest for life with a sensuality and ferocity that is denied to the prematurely aged Friulians. The waste of youth and beauty is a recurrent theme in Pasolini’s work, which begins here to be politically inflected: “this is the living He’s given us,” cries Meni, “we die, we’re butchered, drenched in Christian blood...And what good was praying and working and sweating and swearing all through our miserable young years?” Meni’s blasphemous despair is not only a rebellion against God, but against a religiously sanctioned work ethic that enslaves the peasant classes.

That the Ottomans suddenly change route and spare Casarsa is seen by the community as a sign of divine Providence, but Pasolini has more mixed feelings: while they are saved from harm, Friulians are also denied an opportunity to destroy the centuries-old structures of religious and social oppression. In the tense exchanges

between Pauli and Meni, Pasolini represents the conflict between his own attachment to Friuli's ancient ways of life and the awareness that their preservation depends on poverty and backwardness. *The Turks in Friuli* adds as fundamental piece to the puzzle of Pasolini's enduring attraction for the maternal land of Friuli and its language, as well as his critique of power and his understanding of history as uneven development, which will go on to inform his engagement with other peripheries in Italy and the world.

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¹ A notable exception is Barry McCrea's comparative study of Pasolini's Friulian and Irish Gaelic poetry. See also Baranski, Sartarelli's notes to his edition of *The Selected Poetry*, and the well-researched sections on the Friulian years in Schwartz's biography.

² Pasolini reconstructs the circumstances of his brother's death in a letter to Luciano Serra of 7 February 1945 (*Letters*, 218-19).

³ The inscription is reproduced in Andreina Ciceri's 1995 edition of the text.

⁴ The play was first performed in 1976 and appeared in print in the same year, edited by Luigi Ciceri. For this translation I have referred to the original Friulian in the version of the text included in the volume *Teatro* of Siti's and De Laude's collected works, which also provides details of the two productions by Rodolfo Castiglione (1976) and Elio de Capitani (1996).